

STATEMENT OF REP. JOHN CONYERS, JR.
Homeland Security Subcommittee on Rules
“Homeland Security Jurisdiction: the Perspective of Committee Leaders”
2237 Rayburn House Office Building
4:30 PM, Wednesday, March 24, 2004

Let me say at the outset that, at a minimum, I believe the Judiciary Committee should retain legislative and oversight jurisdiction over law enforcement and immigration policy. I further believe that the burden of proof for the continued existence of the Select Committee on Homeland Security lies with the proponents of that idea.

With respect to law enforcement, it would disturb the continuity of the House to move these matters to another committee. The Judiciary Committee has the history, background, and the experience to oversee this area.

In the 107th Congress, we (1) worked to improve information sharing via the Homeland Security Information Sharing Act; (2) improved federal regulation of explosives via the Anti-Terrorism Explosives Act; and (3) updated the FBI’s National Instant Background Criminal Background Check System to keep guns out of the hands of criminals. This Congress, the Committee has (1) passed a law to outlaw plastic guns via the Undetectable Firearms Act; and (2) passed legislation to provide new penalties for spreading terrorism-related hoaxes.

In addition, we are engaged in numerous oversight projects, joint letters, GAO reviews, and examinations concerning law enforcement and homeland security.

The Judiciary Committee also is uniquely equipped to oversee both international and domestic terrorism threats. We all know that the events of September 11, 2001, were the worst terrorist attacks on American soil in history and necessitated an overhaul of our intelligence and law enforcement regime. We should not forget, however, that the worst terrorist attack before

that day was an act of domestic terrorism in Oklahoma City, with no tie to any foreign country or foreign organization. Clearly, any committee overseeing our security needs must see them with an eye to both international and domestic threats. It is the Judiciary Committee that has expertise and history in both of these areas.

Moreover, as Chairman Sensenbrenner has noted, many of these issues are not just about enhancing security but about the balancing of security interests with civil liberties interests. It would be counterintuitive for security oversight to be moved to one committee while the civil liberties issues remained in another. None of these issues can be considered in a vacuum; rather, they must be discussed as indivisible parts of a whole.

With respect to immigration, I also believe the Judiciary Committee has the relevant and necessary expertise. It is important to mention that the work of the Committee has not been purely academic in nature in this area. We worked in a bipartisan manner at the Committee level to propose changes to our immigration laws in the PATRIOT Act. In addition, Chairman Sensenbrenner and I drafted legislation to restructure the INS, much of which was incorporated into the final bill establishing the Homeland Security Department. We also worked together as a Committee to draft and pass into law the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002. Our Committee has conducted numerous immigration hearings to follow up on terrorism-related immigration issues and the creation of the Homeland Security Department.

In closing, I would note that the Senate has not created a Committee on Homeland Security and is well able to study immigration and law enforcement within its current jurisdictional structure.

I hope the Select Committee will take these views into consideration as it continues its review of homeland security jurisdiction and the House Rules.